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SUBJECT: Strong reaction to death of Pope John Paul II

¶1. (U) Summary: The Philippines has reacted with deep sorrow to news of the death of Pope John Paul II. President Arroyo announced an official mourning period that will last until the Pope's funeral, which she plans to attend. The Catholic Church will hold a requiem mass in honor of Pope John Paul II on April 6 in Manila. Cardinal Vidal is eligible to serve as an elector in the upcoming Conclave, as is Cardinal Sin, but the latter is ill and may not be able to travel. National leaders, including prominent Muslim and Protestant clerics, have expressed their condolences, as have the New People's Army (NPA) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Filipino Catholics felt a very special bond with Pope John Paul II and he will be genuinely missed. End Summary.

Sorrow in the Philippines

¶2. (U) The Philippines, a predominantly Roman Catholic country, reacted with deep sorrow to news of the death of Pope John Paul II. (Note: Of the country's 86 million people, an estimated 83 percent are Catholic. End note) Millions of Filipinos expressed their grief publicly at crowded masses nationwide after news of the Pope's death spread early on April 3. Media outlets blanketed television with news of the Pope's death throughout the day on April 3 and into April 4.

¶3. (U) President Arroyo announced a period of national mourning that will last until the Pope's funeral, and ordered that flags at government sites fly at half-staff. In a public statement, Arroyo remarked that Pope John Paul II "was a holy champion of the Filipino family and of Christian values," that he had visited the Philippines twice, and that she had met him three times. Malacanang Palace contacts confirmed press reports that Arroyo, a Roman Catholic who attends mass every day, and husband Mike Arroyo would attend the funeral, departing on April 5 or 6, depending on the date of the funeral. Her advance team was due to depart Manila on April 4.

Catholic Church Reaction

¶4. (U) The Catholic Church in the Philippines plans to hold a special requiem mass in honor of Pope John Paul II on April 6 at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, also known as the Manila Cathedral, in downtown Manila. A large mass presided over by Archbishop Rosales of Manila and attended by President Arroyo, former Presidents Corazon Aquino and Fidel V. Ramos, and other Filipino notables already took place late on April 3. As leader of the most populous diocese in the country, Archbishop Rosales issued a statement urging Filipinos to join others in the international community in their sorrow, stating that the Pope had given "himself completely to God. As Filipinos, we especially recall the times he was physically present with us, being amongst us and blessing us." A group of priests plans to plant 84 seedlings at a Manila park to be named after Pope John Paul II to mark his age at the time of his death.

¶5. (SBU) On a conversation with Dep Pol/C on April 4, Monsignor Hernando Coronel, the General Secretary of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), said that Vatican-based Cardinal Ratzinger had already been in touch with the Apostolic Nunciature in Manila about funeral arrangements and other issues. According to Msgr. Coronel, Ricardo Cardinal Vidal (74) is eligible to serve as an elector in the upcoming Conclave, as is Jaime Cardinal Sin (76), although the latter is ill and may not be able to travel. (Note: Vidal is not that well himself -- he recently had a heart-related medical procedure. Sin, the former Archbishop of Manila who spoke out forcefully against the Marcos dictatorship, is in a wheelchair, has serious heart problems, and is undergoing regular dialysis. End note) Jose Tomas Cardinal Sanchez (85), who resides in Rome, is too old to serve as an elector. In a December 2004 meeting, Cardinal Vidal had told Dep Pol/C that he has deep admiration for Francis Cardinal Arinze of Nigeria, who has

been mentioned as a candidate for the papacy.

Other Reactions

16. (U) Scores of national leaders, including prominent Muslim and Protestant clerics, expressed their condolences, as did the NPA and the MILF. Some of their comments follow:

-- Senate President Franklin Drilon marked the opening ceremony of the 112th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in Manila on April 3 by stating that Filipinos would remember the Pope "for his fight for human dignity and steadfast work in bringing peace to all nations;"

-- Opposition Senator Edgardo Angara lauded the Pope's fight against child abuse and his opposition to the Marcos regime;

-- Senate Minority leader Senator Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr. said the Pope's life had had a tremendous impact and highlighted the Pope's proposal that debts of poor countries be forgiven by creditors;

-- Brother Eddie Villanueva, leader of the Evangelical Protestant "Jesus Is Lord" movement and a 2004 presidential candidate, thanked the Pope for supporting the "marginalized and less privileged," and predicted that the Pope's death would spur a renewed interest in Christianity throughout the country;

-- Shariff Julabbi, a leader of the Ulama League (an association of Muslim clerics in Mindanao), hailed the Pope for serving as a "bridge of understanding" between the world's Christian and Muslim communities;

-- Mohagher Iqbal, commenting on behalf of the MILF's Central Committee through its website, called the Pope "a tireless campaigner of world peace and champion of religious reconciliation;"

-- NPA spokesman Gregorio "Ka Roger" Rosal sent the NPA's condolences to leading print media on April 3 via a cell phone text message.

Comment

17. (SBU) Filipino Catholics felt a very special bond with Pope John Paul II and he will be missed. His two visits to the country met with wild enthusiasm and were also historic -- the first (in 1981) helped spur opposition to the Marcos regime while the second (in 1995) attracted a crowd of four or five million during a mass in Manila. Pope John Paul II's doctrinal views, conservative on moral and family issues and socially liberal on economic issues, were popular among the local Catholic clergy and most Filipino Catholics. The Pope's ecumenical efforts also had special resonance in the Philippines, where the Church has reached out to Muslims -- who have long felt alienated from the Catholic majority -- in an effort to promote national reconciliation. Filipinos will watch the upcoming funeral and Conclave very carefully for signals on where the Church -- a very important institution in the Philippines -- might be headed next.

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